Equity, Justice, and Human Rights in Distance Education

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Abstract

The prospect of equity, justice, and democratic governance in distance education is an important issue. Originally, we hailed the promise of distance education to be the ubiquitous presence of educational opportunity in a globalized online world. However, it turns out that at least some of the challenges of distance education may be precisely the same as the historical impediments to traditional classroom education. This paper proposes applying the same ethical concepts of justice and human rights to distance education as in traditional classroom education. The argument revolves around the concepts of linguistic and cultural competence, as well as cultural accessibility. Until and unless these dynamics are recognized and dealt with institutionally and organizationally equity, justice, and human rights in distance education will not exist. The promise of open and democratic distance education will be a broken promise with no institutional commitments assuring equity, justice, and human rights as long as everyone does not have the same access to successful experiences in distance education. From this theoretical perspective, the dynamics of distance education in a global society have only been masquerading as the social engineering of elitism for the global society of tomorrow.

Moreover, these issues are particularly meaningful at this time as organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP are working towards establishing agendas for global democratic governance throughout schools the world over. Now is the time to initiate research programs that will monitor the development of these agendas for equity and democratic governance as they are inculcated throughout schools in every country around the world. Anticipatory and preventive research initiatives that are implemented now could help gauge the progress of democratic governance in distance education as well as classroom education.

Keywords: Distance Education, Equity, Justice

1. Understanding Distance Education

According to Nussbaum (2001), "international political and economic thought should be feminist" (p. 4). In Nussbaum's capabilities approach, proper measures of the health and justice of political and economic systems reflect the amount of capability women have for participating and contributing to their own success and autonomy in those same systems. Similarly, this paper will argue that measuring the health and justice of distance education indicates the terms of its cultural accessibility.

Originally, we hailed the promise of distance education to be the ubiquitous presence of educational opportunity in a globalized online world. However, it turns out that at least some of the challenges of distance education may be precisely the same as the historical impediments to traditional classroom education (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Singh, 2011; Richter & McPherson, 2012).

This paper proposes applying ethical concepts of justice and human rights to distance education as in traditional classroom education. The argument revolves around the concepts of linguistic and cultural competence, as well as cultural accessibility. Until and unless these dynamics are recognized and dealt with institutionally and organizationally equity, justice, and human rights in distance education will not exist. The promise of open and democratic distance education will be a broken promise with no institutional commitments assuring equity, justice, and human rights as long as everyone does not have the same access to successful experiences in distance education (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011; Polat, 2011). From this theoretical perspective, the dynamics of distance education in a global society have only been masquerading as the social engineering of elitism for the global society of tomorrow.

1.1 The Role of Culture in Distance Education

The now-classic argument in linguistics between Noam Chomsky (1965) and Dell Hymes (1972) introduced a new sensitivity to the ideas of linguistic and cultural competence as key factors in education. Chomsky had stated that linguistic competence was coterminous with the syntactic properties of language use. Hymes countered by saying that to equate syntax with linguistic competence was to slight instances of people who did

not use proper syntax, and who did not display linguistic competence. If Chomsky was correct about treating grammar and linguistic competence as axiomatic givens in his theory, then either the entire field of sociolinguistics would not exist or it would have no meaning. Hymes introduced the term communicative competence to suggest that he was most interested in the aspects of language usage that were situationally constructed and always changing.

The work of Labov (1991) in sociolinguistics, Gumperz (1972) in communicative competence, and Heath (1983) in sociocultural aspects of language competence and performance, all provide examples indicating that social structure influences language in intimate ways, and that language reflects social structure. Canale & Swain (1980) proceeded to coin the terms strategic competence and discourse competence. Celce-Murcia (2007) and Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1995) introduced the concepts of learning competence that again fly in the face of Chomsky's conceptualization of people occupying some state of assumed linguistic competence. Chomsky is turned on his head by this research because in his world of linguistic formalism deviation from the norm is of no consequence, whereas, from sociolinguistic standpoint language variability is exciting and meaningful.

Likewise, distance education does not exist in a vacuum: surely, it must be constrained by culture, as well. The literature is replete with examples of distance education in which students from remote cultures do not have the same foundation for success as do others (Willems & Bossum, 2012; Tait, 2013; Ron-Balsera & Marphatia, 2012; Singh, 2011; Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Richter & McPherson, 2012; Polat, 2011; Clarke & Morgan, 2011; Flowers, Flowers, Flowers, & Moore, 2014; Anderson & Dron, 2010). If they have no cultural access to distance education either because they do not have access to the technology, or they do not have access to language and socialization that would prepare them fully to embrace and absorb such an experience, then distance education is not yet open education.

When Shirley Heath wrote Ways with Words (1983), she studied a community of children who had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks. The social structure of that community was quite literally bifurcated by the train tracks – the upper classes were on one side, and the working classes were on the other. As such, Heath set out to study the way these working class children grew up in relation to their academic performance. What she found is that there was a big distinction between those children who grew up on the right side of the tracks, who were members of the good half of society, and the children from the wrong side of the tracks.

Perceived as linguistic incompetence, their linguistic differentiation touched every aspect of the way they communicated in school. Furthermore, their linguistic incompetence had also become a kind of cultural incompetence and it was the main impediment to engaging all the positive transformations of a successful individual in that community through school and the life course. In other words, the children Heath followed in her ethnographic study could not simply go to school, speak well, interact well, know when to raise their hands to ask permission to speak, and receive good grades earmarking them for continued success. Without the socialization to do these things at an early age, they paid the price ever after.

Consigned instead to the lower half of the class behaviorally and academically, this differential socialization for language and social interaction became the prime indicator of the possible outcomes for the success of a child from the wrong side of the tracks.

They were the same indicators and standards held up to all the children, but those from the wrong side of the tracks experienced their differential socialization as a hindrance to success.

Heath followed these children for years and found that children who could not routinely speak grammatically correct English were like targets for negative evaluation. The teachers routinely identify them, they are singled-out, treated in a pejorative way, and their social fate is sealed. Yet, the worst part was still to come because if Chomsky was correct and generative grammar entails linguistic competence, then correct grammar actually defines linguistic competence.

Therefore, as Chomsky could not explain these children from the wrong side of the tracks, they had no positioning in the meta-theoretical applications of the formalized modern world, and they were not even interesting ideologically – they were simply outliers who missed the boat, and whose socialization for language was flawed and incompetent to begin with – end of story.

Thus, Heath's work serves as an exemplar of the concepts of linguistic and cultural competence as we understand them today. The classic argument in linguistics between Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1965) forms the subtext of this work and frames the stance of this paper. Hymes coined a new terminology that diverged

enough from Chomsky's theoretical distinctions of linguistic competence and linguistic performance as to sidestep the semantic baggage inherent in these terms. Hymes coined the terms communicative competence and communicative performance. Hymes (1972) further added more gasoline to the fire when he claimed very specifically that Chomsky had actually linked together the ideologies of "perfect competence, homogenous speech community, and independence of sociocultural features" (p. 57).

Chomsky's (1965) original equation of syntactic theory, correctness, and social structure, theoretically, meta-theoretically, and ideologically sidestepped anyone who was from the wrong side of the tracks and did not speak grammatically correct language. These students were misguided not only theoretically, but also ideologically, labeled as outliers who did not deserve our attention. As if to say that no linguist would set out to study grammatically incorrect English and make a theory of it, the assumption was that grammar and correct ideological positioning are all in-born, virgin-birthed traits in the minds of those who are academically correct, socially correct, and politically correct.

1.2 Language, Culture and Contextualized Distance Education

Hymes (1972) uncovered the sleeping dragon when he pointed out that Chomsky's view of generative grammar had equated what is linguistically and theoretically correct with what is ideologically and socioculturally correct. Suddenly, a crack appeared in the transformational generative armor as linguists began to perceive Chomsky as an elitist, ivory-tower formalist. The resulting emphasis on the sociolinguistic aspects of language use have been reverberating in education ever since. There has been a growing sentiment in the distance education literature suggesting it is important and relevant to make similar applications to distance learning (Anderson & Dron, 2010; Armstrong & Barton, 1999; Basit & Tomlinson, 2012; Han, 2013; Harry, John, & Keegan, 2013; Moore, 2013a; Moore, 2013b; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Willems & Bossu, 2012).

What is particularly interesting to linguists is to study the endless variation in language competence and language performance. Chomsky's equation of linguistic competence with sociocultural positioning as the proper view of things suddenly smacked of a value-packed social science argument. However, social science must be objective and pragmatic. In our world today, there is simply no way that most people most of the time would want to say that a person with grammatically incorrect speech habits is automatically a societal pariah, and of no real consequence to people who speak and live properly.

This classic debate from linguistics forms the subtext as well as the theoretical frame for the present investigation of distance learning because it forces the issue: are linguistic competence and cultural competence important variables in distance education? In response to this question, I argue that an accurate understanding of the complex and holistic contextualization of distance education as much more than a generic experience in online education is required. How these arguments apply to distance education will be the specific topic of the remainder of this paper.

1.3 Distance Education as An Open Educational Resource (OER)

How truly open is distance education if an OER is only available to a select few (Richter & McPherson, 2012)? For example, we have seen research indicating that the idea of teaching, learning, and testing languages is itself a whole field of study in and of itself (Bachman & Palmer, 1982; Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Yet, in Chomsky's work, this was all somehow irrelevant. Chomsky wanted his theory to say that everything proper about language use is actually a natural endowment. However, linguists, sociologists, and sociolinguists have patently rejected these arguments and ascertained that the entire domain of language learning and its relation to social structure is immensely vast and complex.

Consequently, we need to ask the following questions regarding truly effective distance learning:

Is it fair to expect the whole world to engage the practices of distance education in English?

Is it fair to assume that online distance learning democratizes education when there are still so many people who do not have access to the internet?

Is distance learning truly open and democratic if it pays no attention to the primary languages, cultural backgrounds, and diverse socialization of targeted students?

2. Distance Education Versus Colonialism

Although it seems to present a universal application in a global economy, distance education may actually serve to reify the tenets of colonialism and the subjugation of indigenous people (Clarke & Morgan, 2011). In this view, replicated knowingly or unknowingly, the legacies of colonialism in distance education institutions become bastions of colonial conservatism. They assume elitist polices such as establishing the practice of selection through exams, and education thus becomes an alienating institution (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). This becomes an issue of human relations and human rights. Which culture will have the most favorable preparation for success in a program of distance education, and who says so?

3. The English Language as the Context for Distance Education

Is it fair to structure all distance education in the English language (Richter & McPherson, 2012)? Is this not the equivalent of forcing the ways of the white man on indigenous cultures, and forcing them to give in to their oppressor and abandon the heritage of their own culture (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012)? One not socialized in fluent English ameliorates the opportunity provided by distance education. The Chinese pursue distance education aggressively according to Wu (2014). It is also worth noting they are experiencing a number of challenges with implementations. Implementing a system pervasively with equal ease, even among one country of people, is challenging if there is such a divergence of socialization and language.

Put another way, initiating a Chinese distance learning program in this country with the policy that all education takes place in Chinese, according to the principles of Chinese education, would likely not be received well, respected, and tolerated.

Americans would probably fail miserably if immersed in a Chinese educational system. This is a crude analogy to the situation we create around the world when we make assumptions about distance learning.

4. Cultural Diversity Versus Privileged Education

Although OERs are being presented as the solution to the problem of educating everyone in the diverse global society of tomorrow, the promise of cultural diversity has been broken by the reality of creating privileged education for a select few (Polat, 2011). To assume that cultural background is inert, and the internet levels the playing field in a global economy is not an accurate way to approach open education. When education slights the theme of cultural access, and when it does not meet the students halfway in terms of offering a meaningful experience there is no reason to believe it will be a successful experience. Either we commit to honoring cultural diversity in distance education or we commit to privileged education. Failing to be aware of the choice implies failure to resolve the issue, and separates distance education from the cultural constraints of traditional classroom education.

The Limits of Distance Education and the Limits of Ethics, Justice, and Human Rights

Distance education, like all education, is not a generic transfer of information but rather a contextualized reification of existing social structure (Ron-Balsera & Marphatia, 2012; Singh, 2011; Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Tait, 2013). The only way to ensure full support of diverse cultures in open education is to become aware of the impact of cultural access on education. It is through a conscious commitment to ethics, justice, and human rights that we will knowingly sidestep the assumptions of normalcy that characterize elitist educational institutions. When one considers the global world of tomorrow and the promise of ubiquitous technology for information, communication, and education, one begins to realize that the boundaries, entitlements, and limits of distance education will be nothing less than a reflection of our cultural commitments to ethics, justice, and human rights.

5. Conclusion

UNESCO (2014) keeps statistics for global literacy, country by country. However, with all their good intentions the concept of literacy will likely undergo revision in the near future as we account for more than tradition verbal and mathematical literacy. Indeed, today we need to contemplate the meaning of technological literacy, how important it might be in the education of the global community of tomorrow, and exactly what that implies for the role of distance education when it comes to imparting technological literacy.

Agendas for future research in the structure and development of distance learning go hand on hand with agendas

for the development of all education. Specifically, United Nations organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP have agendas that entail the implementation of democratic governance in education the world over. Yet, this implies that now is the time to initiate research into the perceptions and preconceptions held by administrators, teachers, and students regarding the imminent institutionalization of democratic governance as an educational priority. As such, future research needs to address the concepts of equity, justice, and democratic governance all over the world (a) in distance education, (b) in classroom education, and (c) in anticipation of the issues and challenges associated with implementing these agendas in global education.

The initiation of vast distance learning programs is destined to have a dual challenge in the future. Either it will result in the establishment of a global society in which everyone has the privilege of receiving an open and democratic educational experience, or it will result in pockets of the global community where education serves as little more than a custodial influence to prepare people for lower tier job opportunities in the world of tomorrow.

We thought we faced off with these issues in this country by considering the research and opening the dialogue. Some of us thought the University of Phoenix was an exemplar of the future of education in this country and around the world. It was not long ago that no one would have expected a for-profit online university catering to working adults to mushroom in attendance. However, it now becomes evident that the United States was but a laboratory for global distance education experiments, and one has to wonder how much of our pride in distance education a reflection of our own pride in our own culture is. Whom does education serve?

UNESCO and the United Nations have established education and literacy as being of fundamental importance in the coming global economy. In fact, "the primary 'Millennium Goal' set by the United Nations in 2010 was to 'Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger' by 2015" (Richter & McPherson, 2012, p. 201) and by implication this could only be accomplished by eradicating illiteracy and improving educational opportunity the world over. The purpose of this paper was to highlight some of the ways in which distance education has faced the same challenges as traditional classroom education, and therefore the same outcomes, namely, the reification of social structure through the cultural context of education.

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